

**What is a synod? Dialogue and listening****15 March 2022****Purpose of talks this evening and next week**

This evening and next Tuesday we plan to think about the *synodal pathway* launched by Pope Francis last autumn. This evening will look at the background and meaning of synods; next week we will focus on the Holy Father's vision for the process as a source of guidance and inspiration for us. I won't duplicate what is in the material from the pope and our own as this is easily accessed. I will quote now an extract from our archbishop's Pastoral from October last year (<https://archbishopjohnwilson.com/2021/10/17/archdiocese-of-southwark-pastoral-letter-for-the-opening-of-the-synod/>) In this parish for the 'process' your synodal team gave you excellent material in encouraging you to take part in the meetings and the questionnaires, and I don't want to duplicate that either: my talks are a supplement to this, as aids to help us in further reflection

**What is a synod?**

The word 'synod' is used in Christianity to describe a council or gathering. It brings together the Greek words for 'with' (*syn*) and road or path (*hodos*): so in a synod people are seen as being on a pathway together. In the history of the Church the word is more or less interchangeable with the word 'Council'. I say more or less because there are some distinctions. The word 'Council' is *usually* employed for Councils *of the whole Catholic Church*, using the adjective 'Ecumenical' (meaning here 'of the whole world', not different churches). For Catholics there have been 21 such councils; Eastern Orthodox and (in theory) Anglican and Protestant Christians only acknowledge as authoritative the first seven of these (down to the Second Council of Nicaea in the eighth century). The term 'synod' usually means historically something more local rather than universal, though sometimes it will be applied to worldwide council. Sometimes local synods have been important and controversial - such as the Synod of Pistoia in Italy in 1786 which, under pressure from the local State, sought to reform radically the local Catholic Church. Usually local synods have been all the bishops in a given area.

**Different things in different churches**

To add to the confusion the word has been and is used differently in different denominations. For the Russian Orthodox Church, the 'Holy Synod' was simply the body which ran the Church from the time of Tsar Peter the Great until the Russian Revolution, a sort of government ministry (in place of the Patriarch).

In the Church of England, there are now synods at three different levels in the Church: the General Synod, diocesan synods and deanery synods. Where these differ from earlier synods in the churches is that laypeople are fully voting members (bishops, clergy and laypeople are grouped in separate 'houses'). As the Church of England is established by law, these bodies are ultimately regulated by Parliament, although they also exist in other Anglican churches which are not 'established' (that is all the rest). Clergy and laypeople in these bodies are elected indirectly. In the Anglican Communion synodical structures have significantly changed the way the communion is run,

qualifying in this country the power of Parliament over the church and the powers of bishops; it is self-consciously democratic, and in some places (such as the American Episcopal Church) this has reflected State democratic structures very closely.

### **Synods in the Catholic Church**

In the Catholic Church the word is now used in three different ways: (i) in the Eastern Catholic Churches (e.g. Ukraine), it simply means the assembly of bishops in a local Church (so it is the same as our Bishops Conferences), (ii) a synod for a diocese: a 'one-off' event set up by the bishop. This is described in Canon Law as an 'assembly of selected priests and other members of Christ's faithful.' There is a complicated system of defining who takes part and so on; but these events are comparatively rare: there was one in the Archdiocese of Liverpool recently as part of the overall synodal process. (iii) Synods of Bishops. This structure was set up after Vatican II, being assemblies of bishops set up by the pope, either worldwide to consider a specific issue (the Family or Synodality itself), or local (e.g. Africa, the Amazon)

There is to be a Synod of Bishops on synodality to take place in 2023; the process we have been taking part in is seen as an essential part of the preparation for this assembly. While there have been smaller consultative exercises in advance of other groupings (most notably in before the Synod of the Amazon in South America) the worldwide exercise we have been part of is unprecedented and potentially far-reaching. Historically in the Catholic Church, and until recently in all churches, bishops in particular were seen as the participants in synods: they did not need to consult anyone else, and particularly not those who were not clergy. Part of what we believe is that bishops are seen as the successors of the apostles, taking from them the authority to lead the Church in the name of Christ. For most of the history of the Church, this concept of leadership has been seen in largely monarchical terms: it is clear that the model of leadership entailed in the process the pope has started is different. It is still leadership - and we are not moving towards an Anglican model of synodical government - but a leadership which should be more collaborative and consultative.

In the process, we have stressed that people need to be given a voice: so, at least in this parish, no topic was 'off limits.' This was rather unsettling, I think, for many, who thought that some things couldn't be discussed. Again, this is largely unprecedented. Of course, some things can't be changed at a local level (and arguably, some things not at any level), but you have been given the freedom to say or write what you think. Of course for many this will only make sense if people are listened to.

### **Theology of dialogue**

At this stage I want us to think a bit about why this process should matter - not simply if we want to change things, but because of what it says about our beliefs about one another as baptised followers of Jesus Christ. I think there are three sets of considerations.

#### **(i) Unity**

In the Creed on Sundays we say 'I believe in one, Holy and Catholic Church.' We join that Church when we are baptised; and we believe that Our Lord wants his followers to live together in unity. We won't always agreed with each other; we won't always even like each other; but we are fellow members of the Body of Christ. It is easy for the Church to be damaged by divisions, and here I don't mean divisions between us and other Christians, but divisions within the Roman Catholic

Church, divisions which are very serious in some places (e.g. the United States). Such disunity not only saddens Our Lord's heart; it impairs our witness and mission very badly, at a time when we face very serious challenges. Moreover we don't foster unity if we avoid some subjects, either because we don't want to think about them ourselves or because we're worried about offending or upsetting those who may disagree with us. Of course to raise difficult issues may initially look as if it is not fostering unity - but only if you don't get the process right.

#### (ii) Dignity of the person

If we are engaged properly in dialogue with another person, we are showing respect for his or her dignity as a person. Every human being is created in the image of God, with inalienable rights and a dignity which can't be taken away; if we take seriously the Lord's command to love our enemies, which we heard as a Sunday gospel a few weeks ago, then this is even true of our foes. We should have a way of talking to others and listening to them which reflects our faith, what makes us different. This is how God works in us. So the Second Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation puts it like this (quote from <https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/RM3-EPR1-2.htm>)

So in a truly synodal way of dialogue we affirm the goodness of God in creation by acknowledging a relationship with the other person: a relationship which should be built on co-operation, openness, making sacrifices, not putting ourselves first, being willing to make concessions, listening....this is why I said last week that there is a link between the reconciliation the Church is seeking to end this terrible war in Ukraine and the whole synodal path initiated by the pope. So often people in the world who want to be confrontational, even if this seems justified in the face of aggression, don't really understand the synodal process either. Indeed in the Church, those who don't acknowledge the ways in which Catholic teaching has moved in relation to war and peace are also those who disparage the Holy Father and what he is trying to do.

#### (iii) Dialogue and God's relationship with us

The first Council of the Church is described in Acts chapter 15 (quote vv 1-4) It had to address the difficult and divisive issue of whether non-Jews who wanted to be Christians should become Jews first (by being circumcised if they were male, and observing Jewish dietary laws). We know how this divided the apostles themselves. The process of dialogue put before us is rooted in prayer to the Holy Spirit, for guidance; so in any Christian gathering (like our session this evening) we try to begin by asking the Spirit for that same guidance; so, for examples, do cardinals when they meet to elect a new pope. We believe that the Spirit is present in the Church, in lots of different ways; he shows his presence through his guidance. Of course in terms of much decision-making this doesn't mean mistakes aren't made, though it does mean that in terms of the most important things which the Church believes it is free from error. And this means that we shouldn't be afraid of the process of discussion and dialogue. The process is also meant to reflect God's relationship with us, and I will say more about this next week as it was forcibly pointed out over Christmas by the Holy Father, who described the Incarnation, the coming of God among us at Christmas, as an act of dialogue between God and us.

#### **Implications for decision-making....**

In the synodal process so far, we have emphasised the need for the exercise to be completely open and transparent. Our excellent team not only summarised the responses in the newsletter; they have

made available to all of you an excellent and comprehensive report, a model for good practice in the diocese (sadly in many parishes this exercise hasn't been taken seriously). This is not simply a convenient administrative decision; we know that in the Church, as in any body, where discussions or decision-making has not been open or transparent, terrible things have happened. The child abuse scandal in the Church, which has not, worldwide, run its course, has shown again and again, as Deacon Séan has often (and courageously) shown in newsletter articles, the damage done when decisions are made by closed clerical elites. Pope Francis has acknowledged this too, even in relation to mistaken decisions to which he has been party (particularly in South America). It affects all of us - in dioceses, in Catholic schools and universities, in religious orders and congregations, in Catholic charities, and in parishes.

It is important that all of us listen to young Catholics, and indeed how the Church strengthens its work with young people is a big theme in the feedback we have had from you. I want to read two extracts from pieces written recently by young Catholic women in the new quarterly journal *Inspire* published by the *The Tablet* (the first by Stephanie MacGillivray, who works for *Caritas Internationalis* in Rome, and the second by our parishioner Ruth McConkey - accessible via <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/inspire/20/1935/welcome-to-inspire-the-international-catholic-quarterly-for-young-adults>).

This brings me to my most important point really. The process we have been engaged in is not simply about giving the bishops data for their discussion next year. It is meant to be the beginning of a process, the beginning of a new way of being the Church, demanding better and more transparent discussions and decision-making: indeed in our synod document the call for more transparency in terms of how the parish is run comes through very clearly.

It boils down to our theology of creation. If God had wanted to create a world of robots, he would have created a world of robots. Instead he made human beings in his image with intelligence and feelings, men and women with the capacity to choose to do good or to do evil. He is not a sergeant major in a parade ground; he doesn't have us under his thumb. We are invited to be in a relationship of love with him, grounded in the truth revealed in Jesus, continued in the life of the Church; but he gives us the freedom to choose that path of love - and of course the freedom to walk away. We put before all our brothers and sisters in the world the person of Jesus Christ who offers true life to them; but we only do that effectively if we live among ourselves in love and mutual respect, not domination or authoritarianism. In every age of Christianity we have the chance to renew our being part of the Church, our efforts to share this exciting and life-giving truth; in the synodal pathway we have the opportunity to do this in our own age and in our own parish.

